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UNDER REVIEW

The two young champions, who met as teen-agers, are expected to face off at this year's U.S. Open. A new book by Giri Nathan tracks their parallel ascent.

By

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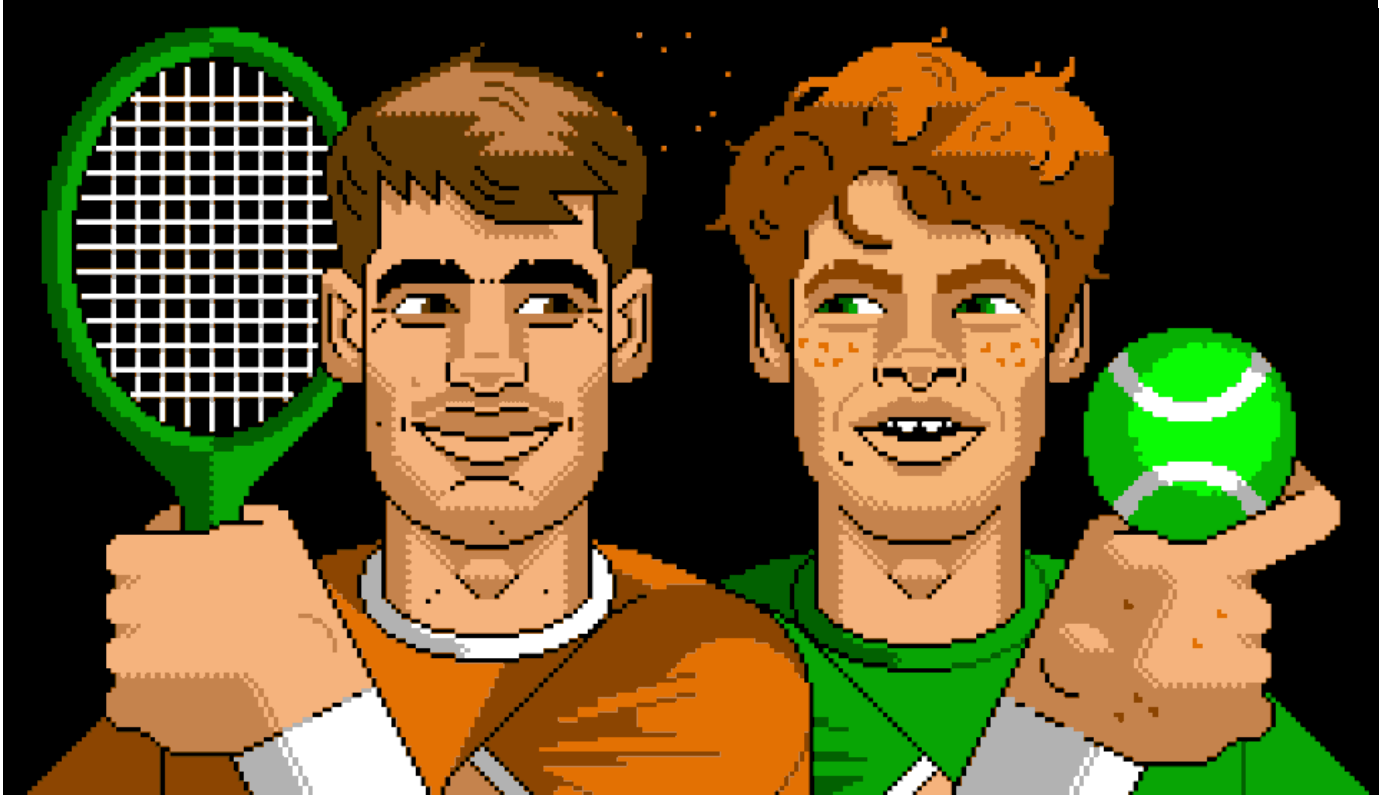

Illustration by Nick Little

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"A person's tennis," John McPhee writes in "Levels of the Game," from 1969, "begins with his nature and background and comes out through his motor mechanisms into shot patterns and characteristics of play." Your style is an expression of your innate self, a product of small decisions, such as the way you hold your racket, your second-serve philosophy, your tendency to patrol the baseline or rush the net. "If he is deliberate," McPhee continues, "he is a deliberate tennis player," just as a flamboyant person plays flamboyantly; these self-discoveries emerge over thousands of hours of practice. But, in order for these styles to mean anything, we require a rival. We need someone else to draw out the unique shape of our play.

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McPhee was focussing on a single match during the 1968 U.S. Open, between Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner, exploring how these young players' contrasting identities—Black vs. white, liberal vs. conservative—manifested in each shot. It's an alluring habit of sportswriters and fans to try to turn fandom into something ethical: we want the teams to embody the places they represent, and for the players' decisions to

say something about our own identities. It could be argued that tennis, more than other sports, lends itself to this kind of head-to-head character interpretation. After all, Tom Brady and Peyton Manning were never on the field at the same time, and Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi, arguably the two greatest attackers in the history of soccer, are rarely within five feet of each other on the pitch. In tennis, all the pressure and lore attaches to a single person, and there are no teammates to hide behind. Players might first become legible to us thanks to clumsy national stereotypes—the hotheaded American, the precise German—but at the highest strata they are reduced to a name: Novak Djokovic became more Joker-like as time went on, just as Roger Federer, as Geoff Dyer once wrote, will always seem to be "Roger, always and only Roger." Calling Rafael Nadal by his full name sounds downright hostile when you could opt for the boyishly innocent Rafa.

And now, with Djokovic the last of that trio still around, we have Carlos Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner, the two brightest lights in the men's game. The sportswriter Giri Nathan spent the 2024 tennis season tracking the two players, and "Changeover," his first book, recounts a breakthrough year for their budding rivalry. Between them, Alcaraz, a twenty-two-year-old Spaniard, and Sinner, a twenty-four-year-old Italian, have won eight of the past nine Grand Slam competitions. Expectations run high for them to meet in the final of this month's U.S. Open.

Nathan lucked into a great year to spend thinking about Alcaraz, who won four tournaments in 2024, and Sinner, who won eight. Or maybe he just sensed an inevitability. At times, their concurrent ascent feels

preordained. They met as talented teen-agers on the Challenger circuit, and Sinner clai caraz even then. As they beca kovic —Sinner at the 2024 A n the year before—to end the each tournament.

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Alcaraz comes fron r was a tennis coach wh ce harbored his own drea e age of four, turning pro ele yant, not someone out to ave as powerful and athletic, v his opponents off balance. e U.S. Open, consequently be e men's rankings. Yet he exuded a kind of laddish innocence, a precocious showman who still lived at home with his parents.

Sinner grew up skiing and playing soccer in South Tyrol, in a part of northern Italy's Dolomites, where people are more likely to speak German than Italian. Given his measured ethos, it's amusing that Sinner grew up idolizing the American skier Bode Miller, a madman

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savant famous for alternating between gold medals and near-death crashes. When he was around thirteen, Sinner realized that the margin for error in downhill skiing was just too great, and he decided to focus on tennis. As Nathan notes, at a time when talent is cocooned and nurtured at first sight, it's rare to find pros who committed to the sport so late.

Tennis is as much about style as it is winning, and Nathan is at his best when distilling players down to their characteristic moments, choices, flourishes. Nadal seems "ancient, yet terribly modern," while Djokovic is "taffy-like," a description that fits his contortionism and also, occasionally, his perplexing brain. The U.S. Open, whose glamorous, floodlit contests have a party-like atmosphere, is perfect for Alcaraz, a "nightclub in the form of a tennis player." Alcaraz plays an aggressive, ebullient style. He pulls off outrageous angles few others could have imagined, and he plays with brawn and accuracy, yet the flourish that has most endeared him to fans is his drop shot, where a ball is hit softly, with just enough spin to barely clear the net, catching opponents off guard. There's something eccentric about the way he ends some daring, baseline-to-baseline brinkmanship with a well-disguised slice that gently feathers over the net.

Alcaraz careens around the court with an anarchic physicality, disappearing from the camera's view as he chases after balls others would regard as lost causes, an overeager puppy. In contrast, Sinner plays with control and calm; it's like an optical illusion, his ability to conjure so much power from his skinny frame. He bashes the ball with a ferocity that has to be heard to be fully appreciated; Nathan compares the sound of Sinner's shots to "a firearm, a vehicle

backfiring" and "a hydraulic press." Where Alcaraz exudes a casual rawness, Sinner expresses himself more deliberately, as someone who has mastered the physics of his own body over time. "That such a lanky boy could produce such alarming noises is a testament to how power works in tennis," Nathan writes. The Italian's rise was more gradual than Alcaraz's; he often went deep in tournaments, steadily rising in the rankings, before finally breaking through, to win the Australian Open, in 2024.

The book bounces back and forth between the two players, and Nathan doesn't play favorites. While Alcaraz seems unguarded and carefree, he is also prone to odd lapses, as though his commitment to aesthetics compels him to make things harder than they have to be. "His losses can look worse than the losses of other top players," Nathan observes. "He can be capable of stupefying ingenuity while playing against the best opponents. . . . He can also, in more pedestrian moments, play squirrelly and confused tennis." He has the tools to dominate, yet he has sometimes failed to put competitors away, instead inviting them, in Nathan's generous description, into "stimulating, inventive exchanges that reminded them of their own capabilities."

Alcaraz's slip-ups are far more interesting than those of Sinner, whose losses seem more like a momentary glitch. In 2024, just as Sinner was celebrating his victory in the Cincinnati Open—a midsize tournament right before the U.S. Open—it was announced that he had twice

tested positive for a banned substance. As Nathan notes, the excuses players come up with often test a true fan's gullibility. In Sinner's case, the offense was traced to a medicated spray used by his physiotherapist, who, in turn, introduced the substance into the star's bloodstream while massaging Sinner's feet, which had a series of open sores. A bizarre, somewhat gross, yet scientifically feasible explanation.

Large swaths of "Changeover" recount the action of specific matches that many fans have probably already watched—these aren't the book's draw. Rather, Nathan excels as a kind of insider-outsider who's tracking not just the matches but how the narratives around them take shape. Thanks to the protection of publicists and managers, "storytelling is consolidated in the hands of the players," Nathan writes, agog at the access that veteran tennis writers tell him about enjoying in the past. But he is resourceful and endlessly curious about what lies behind the media-trained superstar. He sees Sinner at the airport, soon after the announcement of the player's positive tests, before the announcement of his suspension. In the olden days, a journalist might have pressed Sinner, hopeful of getting that first quote. Nathan says hi but decides to tiptoe around it, since this would be the last quasi-normal moment Sinner would have before "hurtling in earnest into a hellfire of scrutiny." He's more interested in observing him in the wild, eating pizza and enjoying a celebratory Coke Zero—a rare indulgence for a high-performing athlete. Later, Nathan realizes that they are on the same flight. "The world's No. 1 player boarded his American Airlines flight in group six, among peons like me."

In July, the billionaire financier Bill Ackman scored an entry to the Hall of Fame Open, a lower-level tournament held in Newport, Rhode Island. He played alongside Jack Sock, a retired pro who qualified for a wildcard entry, having won the tournament in 2021. It was reasonable to assume that Sock partnered with Ackman, known more for his "anti-woke" politics and long-winded social-media posts than for his serve, primarily to make one of the hedge-fund owner's dreams come true. They didn't fare well, losing in straight sets.

It created one of those rare moments of social cohesion, in which everyone could share in the same grievance, laughing at the rich guy failing at one of the only forms of meritocracy we might still believe in. Perhaps it spoke to a void that needed filling. You can be rich, but are you actually good at anything? Ackman played terribly, and he dealt with it by writing a long social-media post about how his extensive public-speaking experience hadn't prepared him for an entirely different, unfathomable form of pressure. No amount of power or influence can make a ball land where you want it to.

I found Ackman's revelation oddly sympathetic, though a professional tennis tournament was no doubt an excessive venue to learn something about pressure and humility. Even for us mortals, there's an enduring idea that tennis is a way of judging our grit. In 1974, W. Timothy Gallwey published "The Inner Game of Tennis," a book that remains influential in self-help circles. Gallwey was interested in the mind-set of the successful tennis player, particularly the amount of

concentration required to pull off the extraordinary. Tennis, he writes, "is played to overcome all habits of mind which inhibit excellence in performance." It's not just about doing something well again and again. It's also about getting over setbacks quickly and quieting intrusive, negative thoughts. What separates the good from the great is the ability to avoid the slippery slope toward meltdown.

"Some amount of self-delusion is in the job description" of the pro athlete, Nathan writes. There's a moment when the author tries to describe what it's like to be proximate to this extreme form of self-confidence, as he chats with Frances Tiafoe, a talented but streaky American, a few minutes after Tiafoe's second-round win at the Cincinnati Open. "Standing next to him," Nathan recalls, "I felt irradiated with confidence, as if it were beaming out of the portal in his gap-toothed grin."

Few of us will ever experience such highs or such lows. As a viewer, I always feel the most anxiety during the changeovers, when the players can do nothing but sit and stare into the void. Friends regard one another with impassive glares, if they deign to look in each other's direction. They are so alone, desperate for instruction from their coaches or families. But isn't this why we watch? Alcaraz and Sinner are early enough in their careers that debates around their legacies feel silly. They are clean surfaces for projection, their goals so immediate and tangible: shots, games, sets. At this point in their lives, they have no problem with solitude. Yet they need one another, just as Roger, Joker, and Rafa once did.

Nathan's book covers 2024, but it provides excellent context for what's happened this season. In June, Alcaraz and Sinner met in the final of the French Open. Faint villain vibes surrounded Sinner, who had recently returned from his suspension. His businesslike demeanor can often be misread as coldness, but in this case it was probably because of the newfound scrutiny around his performances.

Sinner won the first two sets of the final, and he was up 5–3 in the fourth, with three chances at championship point. What followed was one of the most remarkable comebacks the sport has ever seen. Down 0–40, Alcaraz not only salvaged the game but he overturned a two-set deficit to take Sinner to a decisive fifth set. Sinner seemed to grow even thinner in the swell of adoration for his rival. But then, with Alcaraz serving for the championship, Sinner, too, came back. Suddenly, he reverted to being a sinewy wonder, while Alcaraz's once jubilant face appeared to register some serious intrusive thoughts. They played for nearly five and a half hours, with Alcaraz finally holding on to win the fifth set, and the tournament, on tiebreakers.

At some point, I realized that I had stood, watching on my phone, for two hours, too transfixed to move to the couch and turn on the television. Somewhere in that fourth set, this went from being an absorbing final to the kind of sporting event you implored people who didn't care about tennis to watch. And even as Alcaraz held the trophy aloft, Sinner didn't seem like a choker. Tennis is the rare sport where

the runner-up is almost forcibly compelled toward grace, and as Sinner stood smiling next to Alcaraz, someone he had known since his teens, we were certain that they'd both be back.

A clip of Alcaraz circulated a few hours later. He should have been basking in his great legend-making victory. But his beloved Spain was playing Portugal in the finals of the EuropeanNations League, essentially the Cincinnati Open of soccer tournaments. A member of his team informs him that Spain has lost on penalties. He runs his hand through his hair, and he looks shocked, a little crestfallen. In that moment, tennis no longer matters. He pulls out his phone, as if out of instinct. And we remember that he is just a kid. ♦

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